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AUTHOR Goodman, Jesse
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ABSTRACT

A study was made of an early field practicum, in elementary education, which theoretically emphasized quantity and diversity in the students' field experiences and allowed them the opportunity to apply newly acquired curriculum methods and theories. Ten student teachers were intensively interviewed and observed over a six month period. It was apparent that the approved curriculum was rigidly followed. Content and procedures were predetermined according to standard materials. In most cases, students drilled and/or tested pupils' competency of prespecified short term facts and/or skills. Most had little involvement in curriculum development or decision making. The impression received was that they were being trained as educational technicians. It is suggested that preparation programs should focus on teaching prospective teachers the craft of developing curricula based upon progressive principles of curriculum design. This craft includes choosing topics of study; developing the themes, concepts, or content that make up the topic; researching these themes; discovering resources that children can use to explore the themes; developing activities that illuminate the themes of the topic and promote curiosity, creativity, and thoughtfulness among the pupils; and organizing the themes, resources, and activities into a coherent unit of study. (JD)

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WHAT STUDENTS LEARN FROM EARLY FIELD EXPERIENCES:
A CASE STUDY

Jesse Goodman
Washburn University
Topeka, Kansas

A paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, 1984.

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WHAT STUDENTS LEARN FROM EARLY FIELD EXPERIENCES:
A CASE STUDY

Although much controversy has surrounded the ways in which future teachers have been and are prepared, the one component of teacher education that has traditionally been considered valuable is field based experience. There seems to be an almost universal assumption among educators,¹ students, and lay people that student participation in public school classrooms is the most crucial aspect of teacher education (e.g. Conant, 1963; Joyce et al., 1977). In fact, there has been a recent trend to increase the emphasis placed on field experiences within teacher education. A number of state departments of education have begun to mandate early field experiences prior to student teaching (Moore, 1979). Ishler and Kay (1981) found that nearly all teacher education programs in the United States now have some type of early field experience requirement. Rationales behind this trend towards more field experience include giving students opportunities to: experiment with curriculum and instructional decisions, apply theory to practice, increase motivation for and interest in education, and examine vocational choices (e.g. Gehrke, 1981).

Aside from these expressed purposes, most discussion regarding early field experiences has focused on the quantity, not quality, of these practicum. The emphasis is on the amount of time a student should spend in the field; not on what the student should do while s/he is there. The assumption seems to be that the more time spent in the classroom the better. While recently there has been some useful research into the student teaching experience (e.g. Tabachnick et al., 1980; Tabachnick, 1980; Copeland, 1980), there has been virtually no significant research into these early field experiences. For example, after reviewing the literature, Gehrke (1981)

claimed that there has been no serious research analyzing the relationship between programmatic goals and the social reality of early field experiences. What do students do in their practicum sites? What kind of environment do they encounter? What ideas do students develop as they interact with pupils, cooperating teachers, and/or the curriculum? In an effort to address these concerns, this paper will report the findings of a study that examined the students' early field experiences in a teacher preparation program that emphasized these practicums. After portraying what happened during these experiences, implications of the study's findings will be discussed.

Methodology

The methods used to collect and analyze data were those associated with field studies (Claser and Strauss, 1975; Bruyn, 1966). This approach was used because it allowed for the generation of analysis which was grounded in recorded data. This grounded research is free to combine a variety of data gathering methods in developing an analysis of early field experiences.

Setting and Sample Selection

The sample was located in the Elementary Education Program (EEP) at State U., a large southeastern university (all proper names are fictitious). The EEP was often referred to as a "field based" program. Students were placed in a practicum site during their first quarter in the program and were required to spend at least five out of the six quarters necessary for graduation in some type of field placement. With each passing quarter, the students were expected to take on more responsibility for planning and implementing classroom activities. Students started as "Teacher Initiates," then became "Teacher Assistants," "Teacher Associates," and finally "Intensives," (full time student teaching).

The program emphasized quantity and diversity in the students' field experiences. Through exposure to a variety of classrooms, students were expected to develop a broad perspective of education. Although there was no direct university supervision, the program's literature encouraged experimentation and the integration of theory into practice. "It is to be noted that EEP students are desirous of tasks within the field which will allow them the opportunity to apply newly acquired curricular methods and theories" (Field Experience Guidebook).

Nearly all of the students enrolled in the EEP came from the southeastern part of the United States; however, they reflected a variety of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Each student was at least a junior in college, most were between the ages of 20-25, and approximately ninety-five percent were women. An initial group of 23 students was randomly selected. After securing case histories, 10 students who were participating in early field practicums were chosen as the primary, although not exclusive, sample group. Care was taken to include students: at different levels of their professional education, from a diversity of backgrounds, who expressed varied interests, and of different ages and sex. These individuals were selected following the guidelines of theoretical sampling - that is, on the assumption that differences among the participants would facilitate the discovery of theoretical questions, categories, and interrelationships (Glaser and Strauss, 1975).

Methods for Data Collection

Observations and interviews (both formal and informal) were the two main methods of data collection. In addition, the program's literature was reviewed, e.g. student and faculty handbooks, articles written by faculty members, university catalogue, weekly newsletter. Data were recorded in field notes during a six month period - two university quarters.

Each student in the sample group was observed in his/her practicum site at least once. One to three follow-up observations were made of five students from this sample group. Students were observed teaching different subjects within a variety of settings (large group, small group, and individual instruction). The purpose of these observations was to discover what actually happened in the practicum sites. Rather than predetermining specific items to look for, a number of general questions were used to initially guide these observations: How is the classroom organized? What types of interpersonal dynamics exist between the pupils, students, and cooperating teachers? What is taught? What information, opinions, and/or beliefs are exchanged between the participants? More specific observation questions were developed from reviewing field notes and were used as the basis for follow-up observations. In addition, students were observed as they participated in weekly seminar groups (Goodman, 1983) and university education courses (Goodman, 1983a).

Interviews were conducted before and after each practicum observation. Additionally, students within the sample group were interviewed on a weekly or bi-weekly basis as they participated in the other components of the EEP. At first, interviews did not have specific, predetermined questions. Instead, interviews were structured around various areas of concern such as: the purpose of practice teaching; perceptions of what happens during practicum experiences; and individual responses to the organization of, people, and events found within the practicum sites. As field notes were analyzed, more specific questions emerged and were then asked during interviews to gain deeper insight into situations and to clarify misconceptions and ambiguities. Responses from the sample group were often cross checked with other students enrolled in the EEP. One in-depth interview was conducted with each cooperating teacher from the sample group and three cooperating principals. Interviews

were designed to discover the meaning individuals gave to their experiences and how their ideas influenced their actions.

Analysis

Glaser and Strauss' (1975) "constant comparative" method of analysis was used as a guide for understanding the data. Throughout the fieldwork, interview and observation notes were reviewed daily. Incidents and bits of information were at first coded into tentative conceptual categories. As these categories emerged, questions arose that were used to guide further investigation into the field. The findings from these investigations were then compared to the initial categories. Special attention was given to data that seemed to challenge original conceptualizations. Through this constant comparison of data, analytical categories crystalized. For example, during the initial observation of students, it appeared that the elementary curriculum played a decisive role in determining their experience. Later this observation was confirmed during interviews. More observations were made to check this hypothesis out, and to explore exactly how this curriculum effected the students' actions. As these findings emerged from the data, they, too were cross referenced through additional comprehensive interviews with the sample group and through interviews with students outside of the sample group. As a result, the "elementary curriculum" became an analytical category. This return to the data source, followed by modification and/or new generation of ideas, continued until the findings could be presented in some detail. Finally, the participants were given the opportunity to respond to the study's findings before a final draft was written.

As Glaser and Strauss (1975) suggest, the analysis presented in this paper takes a narrative form, using examples from the data to clarify concepts and demonstrate the interrelationship between the analysis and social

reality. From this perspective, the analysis is not a static product. Instead, it is viewed as "...an ever-developing entity" (Glaser and Strauss, 1975, p. 2). One's analysis should be open to modification by the originator as well as other scholars. The data presented in this paper are not designed to "prove" the infallibility of the analysis generated. Rather, the goal is to illuminate concepts and thus provide a basis for further discussion and debate. Presenting the analysis in narrative form reflects its "ever-developing" nature.

Early Field Experiences

Consistent with other research findings, the students within the EEP considered their field experiences as the fundamental substance of their entire education. Students often said that they "...learned to teach in the (elementary) classroom," and therefore spent most of their energy in this endeavor. In order to understand what students learn from these experiences, it is necessary to portray what happens in them.

The Elementary Curriculum - A Narrowing of Experience

One of the first questions students asked themselves upon entering their practicum sites was: "What should I teach?" To a large degree, the answer to this question controlled what the students (as well as the pupils) did in the classroom. The schools' curriculum was predetermined and highly routinized when the students arrived. The standard curriculum determined the daily schedule, course content, and learning/teaching activities. Each subject had its allotted time, and in most practicum sites there was no attempt to integrate subject matter. Almost every lesson that was observed being taught used professionally developed curriculum materials (e.g. textbooks, workbooks, standardized tests) as the basis for instruction.

Reading, math, and grammar dominated the curriculum. In the primary grades these were the only major subjects taught. In grades 4-6, these

subjects still dominated, although social studies and science were each taught for half a year. Of all these areas, reading clearly prevailed over the rest. Many students mentioned that they had taught nothing but reading during their early field experiences. Usually, the first teaching task assigned to students was to work with a child or small group with their reading. Eighty^{six} percent of the lessons observed had something to do with this one subject.

All of the public schools in which students were placed used the same "Skills Development" reading program. Reading was not presented as a wholistic activity that involved the child's imagination and his/her relationship to books, knowledge, or language. Instead, reading was defined as the summation of discrete phonics, comprehension, contextual, and/or structural analysis skills. Each skill was broken up into hundreds of sub-skills, stated in behavioral terms, and taught separately. Success was measured by quantitative tests.

Students were usually observed implementing the various "steps" of this particular reading program: First, pupils were "pre-tested" on a given skill(s). Second, they were drilled using workbooks. Third, they were given a "Criterion Test" at the end of each skill area. Fourth, if the pupils passed all the "Criterion Tests," they took a "Mastery Test" at the end of the chapter. If the pupils failed part of either the "Criterion Test" or the "Mastery Test," they were given "Booster Activity" worksheets to drill them on the specific skill needing attention. This process continued until the pupils passed the "Mastery Test," and then they could begin the next chapter in the textbook.

Deviating from this mechanistic sequence was rare. Jeannie's teaching was representative of the students' experience.

Jeannie called group A (7 children) to the table for reading. After the pupils read the story, she explained the phonic skill being covered in the workbook. The pupils then returned to their seats, and Jeannie went around to help individuals. ...After gym, she called group C to the table and gave them a "Criterion Test" (observation of Jeannie, Teacher Associate).

This routine was rigidly followed. Each principal interviewed stated that the rationale for using a "Skill Development" approach to reading was that this program was specifically designed to increase children's scores on standardized tests. Both cooperating teachers and students said that "teaching for the test" was the major determinant of curriculum decisions.²

In other subjects the approach to curriculum was similar. Both the content and procedure were predetermined according to the standard materials used in the practicum sites. In most cases, students were observed drilling and/or testing for pupil "competency" of prespecified, short term facts and/or skills. The emphasis was on having children read, recall, and repeat "correct answers" found in the textbooks.

Most students had little involvement in curriculum development or decision making. As part of their education courses and Associate/Intensive level practicum experiences, students were required to plan and teach a unit of study. Thirty seven of these students were asked if they had ever taught a unit in which the topic(s) of content and learning activities were developed from their own research and decision making. Only three students responded affirmatively. To fulfill this requirement, most students either taught a series of lessons directly from a text or at the most made minor revisions/additions. When students were asked why they were teaching what they were teaching, the most common answers were: 1) the cooperating teacher told them

what to teach, 2) the lesson was next in line in the textbook, and/or 3) the curriculum was required by the school board. Students had a deferential attitude towards curriculum "experts," people who wrote textbooks and specialists in the school system. For the most part, students did not question the rationale or educational principles that served as the basis for curriculum decisions. Questions of why and what to teach were taken for granted and seen as someone else's job. This acceptance greatly narrowed the range of teaching activities for the vast majority of students. Despite the program's emphasis on curricular experimentation and the integration of theory into practice, the elementary curriculum significantly restricted what students could possibly have learned from these field experiences.

The Nature of Instruction - Management

As students learned what to teach, they also focused attention on how to teach. Due to the heavy emphasis on pupil achievement, the purpose of schooling was to bring children to a certain academic level within a prespecified time period. Neither students or their cooperating teachers had any say in determining the skill level or time period that was set, nor did this schedule take into account any of the individual children within a particular classroom. To most students, getting the pupils "through the material" was the primary task of "instruction" and "learning" became synonymous with successful test scores.

The discussion centered on the problem of motivating pupils to "read" i.e. finish their assigned workbook pages. A number of suggestions were made. Robin then shared that in her reading group she let the kids tell personal stories, and at the end of the period she hadn't finished the assignment. She felt she had failed. The next time she was "a lot firmer" and didn't let the pupils wander from their reading.

She finished the assigned story,,the pupils finished their workbooks, and she felt much better. After each person spoke, the seminar leader concluded their comments by saying "good," "super," or "wonderful" (observation and summary of university seminar meeting).

The major concern for most students was on an outcome or product, not the process of education. For example, integrating children's comments into the teaching of reading could be very effective in encouraging pupil learning. However, because this activity might hamper "getting through the material," it was not considered a viable option.

The effect of this educational goal was dramatic. Instead of "instruction" being an activity in which teachers (students) and pupils explore and share knowledge, stimulate interest, and work together towards a commonly arrived at intellectual goal, "teaching" became an activity or problem of management.

When I look back at my field experiences, the thing that strikes me most is just how little actual teaching went on. Mostly, you just organize the day - make sure everyone was doing what they were supposed to, passed out worksheets, and graded tests (observation of Susie's, Intensive, final conference with her university seminar leader).

As mentioned previously, the "skill development" programs used in the practicum site were designed for little teacher input. The curriculum came complete with specific learning objectives, procedures, time schedules, and tests--all organized for the teacher's implementation.

Students were often reminded by their cooperating teachers, cooperating principals, and university faculty that "being organized" was crucial. Students learned to: organize and manage the day's activities around the curriculum, separate the pupils into their respective ability groups, parcel out the

appropriate time for each subject and group, plan so that while they were working with one group the other children were kept busy with "seatwork," schedule in specials (gym, music, etc.) to keep their disruptive effects down to a minimum, as well as take care of the daily roll, supervise the transportation of pupils from one place to another, and finally, keep track of everyone's "progress" (schoolwork).

The most common management concern expressed by students was discipline. In an effort to keep the children quiet, orderly, and on task, students were observed: turning the lights on and off, putting names on the board, counting down from ten, sending pupils to "time out" corners, etc. Finding discipline techniques that "worked" were often the topic of seminar discussions (Goodman, 1983). No issue seemed more important to students than management and control.

In summary, students had little control over either what or how content would be taught. It seemed few students used techniques to encourage pupil problem-solving, self-directed learning and research, and/or thoughtful interpretation and expression of content. The vast majority were observed doing routine, mechanical types of teaching activities involving little creativity, thoughtfulness, or individual talent.

The Reality of Alternatives

While most individuals took the standard curriculum and nature of instruction for granted, there were a few students and/or cooperating teachers who questioned the value of this education. Students who wanted to experiment learned the names of cooperating teachers (through the student grapevine or from their seminar leader) who were "flexible" and gave students freedom to try novel ideas. There was one student from the primary sample group who attempted to create substantive alternatives within her field placement. This student did not merely follow the standard curriculum or nature of instruction.

While in her placement, she negotiated time to teach her children units that she developed herself.

I think the most interesting thing I did was plan a unit on ecology. I did a lot of my own research on the topic. ...Instead of having the kids read only a textbook and fill out worksheets, I had them make an art display illustrating the balance between all things, they saw a movie about the habitats of wild animals and how they are being destroyed, I brought in a guest speaker from an environmental group and from the utility company, and I had the kids read newspaper articles and children's books that dealt with endangered species and man's relationship to the earth. I ended the unit by having the students write poems and letters to the government about this topic. It was neat deciding what to teach and how to teach it (interview with Judy, Teacher Associate).

Judy was not content with the role of manager of predetermined curriculum. In interviews she expressed the importance of teachers developing curriculum based upon their own and/or their pupils' interests. She said that with support from two faculty members and her cooperating teacher, she learned how to implement her beliefs, "at least to some degree," in her practicum site.

Conclusions and Implications

Space does not allow for a full discussion of the study's conclusions or implications for practice. However, a few ideas are worth emphasizing. As a number of educators have recently suggested (e.g. Apple, 1982), the findings of this study support the notion that teachers are becoming "de-skilled." Rather than learning to be craftspeople who are able to develop curriculum and who creatively use materials, personal skills, and innovative resources in planning and implementing learning activities, these students were, for the most part, being trained as educational technicians. Rather

than using early field experiences to help students reflect on the "what" and "why" of education (e.g. What's worth teaching/learning? Who should decide what curriculum should be taught? Why are some instructional strategies used more than others? Are these strategies supported by sound educational principles?), these practicums merely focused on "how to" questions (e.g. How to give a test, correct worksheets, manage group instruction, etc.). Rather than providing an opportunity to experiment and grow, as the EEP's literature suggested, most students' conceptions and practice of teaching/learning were systematically narrowed as a result of their early field experiences. Often there are unintentional consequences to programmatic goals; however, the influences from these early field experiences cannot be seen as simply unintentional. Student learning from these field placements was, for the most part, in clear contrast. As previously mentioned, most teacher education programs assume that just having students "out in the field" will improve their teaching. The findings of this study strongly challenge this assumption. While this insight is not particularly new, its reiteration and illustration are necessary if we are to ever change this course of events.

For those interested in reversing this trend towards the deskilling of teachers, a number of implications can be drawn from this study's findings. First, our conception of "good teaching" needs to be radically altered. Traditionally, good teaching has been viewed as the mastery of specific techniques of practice. Students learn to plan lessons, lead small groups, control discipline problems, grade tests, and literally hundreds of other methods in their preparation courses and practicums. Unfortunately, this focus has been extremely narrow. We must begin to view teacher preparation as a process of professional socialization. Teaching cannot be isolated from the type of curriculum used in the schools, who controls this curriculum, or how social

pressures influence a classroom's atmosphere and teacher. Only when we help future teachers understand this socializing experience will we be educating students rather than merely training them.

The findings of this study suggest that we need to redirect our concern towards the quality over the quantity of these early field experiences. Rather than just putting students in the field, we need to work closely with the public schools in order to insure, as much as possible, an educative experience. There should be a direct effort made to find and work with those principals and cooperating teachers who support the concepts of student experimentation and reflection. In addition, educators must begin to be more involved in social policy. We must be willing to testify against legislative bills and/or state department of education regulations when they restrict the craft of teaching.

The work of students like Judy (see p. 12) suggest that preparation programs should focus on teaching students the craft of developing curriculum based upon progressive principles of curriculum design (e.g. Goodman, 1983b; Short, 1983). This craft includes: choosing worthwhile topics of study; developing the themes, concepts, or areas of content that make up this topic; researching these themes to increase the teacher's own level of knowledge concerning this topic; discovering resources that children can use to explore these themes; developing activities that illuminate the themes of the topic and promote curiosity, creativity, and/or thoughtfulness among pupils; and organizing these themes, resources, and activities into a coherent unit of study. Developing curriculum is similar to writing a documentary or an article on a given topic. It requires interest in the subject matter, motivation and skill to research relevant information, energy to discover new sources, and the ability to organize the findings of this work into a form

that other people can understand and enjoy. Regretably, state mandated competency lists and most teacher preparation programs seem to have little interest in this level of craftsmanship.³

Finally, more research is desperately needed. While the student teaching experience is beginning to receive adequate attention, other components of teacher education continue to be ignored. What happens to students during their teacher preparation? Are the early field experiences found within the EEP similar to other programs? Are students largely influenced by the elementary curriculum and a managerial conception of instruction? Are they being "deskilled?" Clearly, the conclusions of this one case study are inconclusive. Perhaps the implications just addressed are totally misguided, and additional research will provide insights that are much more useful. One point is certain. Developing quality teacher preparation programs require more than just a conceptual framework. It is equally important to see how our assumptions and ideals are manifested in practice.

Notes

¹To enhance the reading of this paper, the following word guide is provided: Educator- one who teaches or supervises students at the college level, Student- one who is enrolled in a college level teacher education program, Pupil- a child enrolled in an elementary or middle school.

²Both the dominance of reading and a "skills" approach to curriculum in general directly reflected the emphasis of the state's "competency" exam. The influence of this test had increased dramatically in recent years. In 1975 all pupils in their junior year of high school took a state-wide "Functional Literacy Exam" to test their ability to read. This exam broke reading down into discrete sub-skills and tested pupils' "mastery" of them. Seventy percent of the pupils failed at least one part of this exam. There was a public outcry that the tax money for education was being wasted. Since then, schools have been under pressure to increase pupils' scores on this standardized test. For example, in the community fifty miles north of Huntsville (where State U. is located), the superintendent and each principal were fired, and half the teachers were put on probation because the pupils' test scores were the second lowest in the state and well below the national average (observation of Laura's mid-point conference with her university supervisor). Cooperating teachers and students often made reference to the pressure to have their pupils do well on this exam. This emphasis on state test scores created an atmosphere of anxiety and subtle intimidation in many of the classrooms observed.

³In an informal survey of eleven state competency lists, not one included any mention of teachers' ability to develop and implement their own curriculum.

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